Amanda Carmer
Ethics and Aesthetics Seminar
An Examination of Identity Formation in Virtual Reality and It's Real World Implications

I. Introduction

In the early 1920s cultural critic and film theorist Siegried Kracauer described the onslaught of visual reproductions in the form of prints and photographs disseminated through newspapers, magazines and advertisements as a "blizzard" of images. Today this blizzard has transformed into a torrent and it is impossible to escape the bombardment of photographs, graphics, and advertisements. Further, new technologies provide a means of submerging completely into this visual world. The birth of the internet brought an opportunity to communicate across vast distances instantaneously, albeit through a virtual medium, combined with advancements in video game technology it is possible to do so in a completely constructed digital environment. Jean Baudrillard offers a framework for understanding these virtual worlds or *hyper-realities*. I will go into more detail concerning this theory later on, however it is Baudrillard's notion of a hyper-reality, one that is completely made up of images or appearances of the real taken as reality that enables virtual users or gamers to become thoroughly enmeshed emotionally, psychologically, and even economically in such environments.[1] In the following pages I will specifically address the means by which users function in a virtually constructed world and the real world implications of *living* online. I will look at questions surrounding identity formation, behavior, and value attribution based on non-concrete worlds. In addition to Baudrillard's theories of hyper reality, I will rely on the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan to understand how the individual constitutes identity, and the ethical tenets of Emmanuel Levinas to dissect the affects of that identity and resulting behaviors based on self-constructed imagery.

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[1] Baudrillard, Jean. "Simulacra and Simulations." in: Mark Poster (Editor). *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*. Stanford University Press. 1998. pp. 166-184.

II. Ethics, Aesthetics and Virtual Worlds

Virtual reality is, on the most fundamental level a perceptually aesthetic experience. A user sees images on a screen that subsequently elicit a responsive or dictate a specific behavior. This becomes problematic when we realize that concrete decisions are being based on non-concrete inputs. Appearances and simulations of reality bear the same consequential implications as those of their physically present counterparts. If we are to take a Platonic view, namely that of negative continuity emitting from artistic representations, then virtual worlds, like art, offer no true knowledge of our world though they can directly affect real emotions and therefore have the ability to corrupt. Aristotle on the other hand counters that art offers a reprieve from the concerns of everyday life and a vehicle for working out our emotions in a socially acceptable and safe way. For this reason, virtual reality allows for positive avenues of communication and perception to develop. However, as I will explain, in some cases virtual reality becomes everyday life for some and behaviors based on a digitally constructed environment take on real world repercussions. For the purposes of this discussion I will leave alone arguments that attribute aesthetic value to virtual reality and focus on the ethical and social implications of users' emersion in these worlds. I will argue, beyond being considered inherently good, or possessing the ability to corrupt, or (via Kant) that art exists independently of moral, ethical, or political concerns, that virtual reality actually slides between these theoretical definitions of art and the moral code that governs everyday life.

III. Virtual Reality: In Theory and In Practice

The term virtual reality seems to be applied to many different types of electronic-based simulations, from military training exercises to online social networks. The common link between these various environments is the avatar, a digital embodiment of the user or gamer. The main purpose of an avatar is to provide a vehicle for the user to traverse a digitally constructed

world.  Each environment is unique and constructed for a different reason, yet in essence each is a community made up of real people each represented as an avatar. Nick Yee, Stanford University social scientist, provides a more technical description; virtual realities are "graphical environments that enable geographically-distant individuals to interact via graphical avatars."[2] However in ontological terms virtual reality is an idea, it exists as electrical impulses and illuminated pixels on a screen but most strongly in the minds of those who participate. Returning for a moment to Baudrillard, who describes this type of existence as a hyper-reality constituted "through the divine irreverence of images,"[3] we can begin to understand how an idea or a body of information may impact users on the same level as physical reality. Baudrillard explains that hyper-reality results when simulacra, or the objects of a simulation blur the boundaries between "true" and "false", between "real" and "imaginary." It is necessary to explain the difference between a pretend, fake, or fictional reality and the type of reality intended to directly and accurately simulate physical reality. Take, for example an individual who *feigns* sickness, this person may simply go to bed and pretend to be ill, where the individual who *simulates* sickness must produce real, physical symptoms. Symptoms in this analogy represent the category of simulacra, when observed simulated symptoms resemble real symptoms and reality is disturbed. This shift occurs when we assign value to a simulation well beyond representation, where the simulacra now stands-in-for that original and genuine symptom. The affect of this simulation produces a hyper-reality, characterized by four stages or "successive phases of the image; the reflection of a basic reality, one that masks and perverts a basic reality, another that masks the absence of a basic reality, and finally imagery that bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is

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[2] Yee, N., Harris, H., Jabon, M., Bailenson, J.N. (2011). The Expression of Personality in Virtual Worlds. *Social Psychology and Personality Science*.

[3] See Baudrillard.

its own pure simulacrum."[4] For many virtual reality users this may feel like a one-dimensional or even pejorative description. For them virtual reality is much more than an idea its an extension of actual reality, a physical space in which they play, interact with others and essentially build a life. In essence however, virtual reality is made up of the same elements that sip through power lines, impulses shooting back and forth through a vast system and also within the system of the users' brain. Described further by Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* as "a social relation of false consciousness mediated by images."[5] Virtual reality is the ultimate paradigm of false consciousness providing the basis for a cultural and social belief system in which behavioral expectations and economic practices develop. In this society a user's identity and personal fulfillment come not through actually *having* but through the *appearance* of having. Fulfillment functions on a parabolic curve where each subsequent level of fulfillment must be better than, more than, greater than the last.

IV. Specific Platforms: Environments vs. Games

Since the early 1990s and the popularization and consumerization of Internet-based virtual worlds has provided the most accessible platform for social interaction, game play, education, and even business operations. MMORPGs or Massive Multiplayer Online Role Play Games allow users to interact online from the comfort of their couches. The most popular games today include World of Warcraft, recently reported as having ten million plus subscribers world wide; Aion with three million plus subscribers; Final Fantasy with 350,000 subscribers, Runescape with one million plus, and Eve Online with 325,000 subscribers world wide. The goal of an avatar in an MMORPG is to complete a series of challenges or tasks in order to progress to the next 'level' within a prescribed system. All content is prefabricated by the game's maker

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[4] See Baudrillard.

[5] Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: [Radical America Etc.], 1970.

from the appearance of the avatar, to the nature of each challenge, to every detail of the virtual environment. This is just one type of virtual world however, platforms like The Sims and Second Life provide the user with tools to create their own virtual environment and avatar and then develop those on their own timeline and for their own ends. It is this type of virtual reality of which I am most interested since it affords the greatest degree of choice and exploration.

V. Identifying with the Avatar: Jacques Lacan's Psychoanalytic Theory

Users of The Sims and Second Life often construct an avatar that simulates their physical appearance to some degree, despite the opportunity and ability to create a virtual self that is completely of their imagination. Jacques Lacan provides a framework through which we can understand this phenomenon. Lacan tells us that self awareness and therefore our concept of identity develops through the recognition of our external representation, as our reflection in a mirror. Dubbed the *mirror stage*, this revelation occurs around age 6-18 months when a child actually recognizes her image in the mirror as herself.[6] Before this moment the child does not see a distinction between her body, her 'self' and her caregiver. After this moment her sense of self becomes an object outside her body and independent from her caregiver. As a result, the child bases her sense of self on the way others see her. According to Lacan, desire is similarly constituted *through* others, and is not the desire *of* others. In this way, whatever the child believes the other desires will become the child's source for identity construction. This is a slippery slope, we see what others want, approve of, or lust after and believe that object to have value, however we mistakenly transfer that value to ourselves once the object is acquired. This explains the constant and insatiable pursuit of wealth and stature that dictates success.

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[6] See Lacan.

In practice, Lacan's theory functions directly in line with users' activities in virtual reality. Lacan explains his notion of *game theory*, where the decisions of the gamer, in order to satisfy their needs and wants, are directly affected by the decisions of others and vice versa. Taking his mirror stage theory into account we can see that a user's sense of self is based on other's perceptions of them and as a result they will construct an avatar to satisfy the others' assumed expectations. Their behaviors and choices as that avatar will also be effected by their others' reactions to that construction.[7] A final Lacanian theory furthers our understanding of users' behaviors in virtual reality, that of the *fundamental fantasy*. Most of us, as a result of the realization that we exist as an external representation and as a coping mechanism to deal with the fact that we can never possible acquire every object of value in existence, have constructed and live in a world of fantasy. In this world we have constructed expectations of how the world should function, scenarios of wealth, job fulfillment, and attainment of a romantic partner that, once attained, should bring happiness and a feeling of completion. However, despite achieving these milestones we will always feel a sense of emptiness and will constantly desire more. For Lacan this is the ultimate effect of desire, *jouissance*, insatiable and inescapable. For those engaged in virtual worlds like Second Life, the fundamental fantasy takes physical form. Manufactured scenarios intended to satisfy any possible desire are literally constructed in the virtual world. In fact, the makers of Second Life market their product on the claim that 'anything imaginable is possible.'

VI. Ethical Questions: Emmanuel Levinas

Understanding how a user constructs their identity in virtual reality is just the beginning. What does it mean to *exist* in virtual reality, what is *being* in a world that exists only as

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[7] See Lacan.

simulation and is it possible to have face-to-face interactions with others in this world? Emmanuel Levinas claims that the essence of being exists between the individual and the other, but also between individuals and a higher being.[8] In that space between are the results of our actions; detritus of decisions and behaviors; artifacts of virtue and vice that serve as the ultimate indicators of our individual value sets and moral capabilities and in turn these constitute what it means to be in existence. In virtual reality the physicality of face-to-face interactions is replaced by an electronic medium, a screen, but users consider those exchanges to be equally as real and valid. Second Life advocate, entrepreneur, musician, and filmmaker Bernhard Drax qualifies his online interactions as "absolutely" as valuable as his real life face-to-face interactions, citing the familiar guilt of being late or missing a meeting, "I feel the same sense of regret and guilt when I miss a meeting in Second Life that I do in the physical world," Drax states.[9] In the 2010 documentary *Life 2.0*, filmmaker Jason Springarn-Koff follows the lives of four Second Life users, two of these individuals find a deep and genuine love connection in each other, through their avatars, evidence again that virtual interactions in the minds of users are real and significant.[10] The most distinct difference to be noted however is that the creator or higher being and the avatar in virtual reality are one and the same. In user generated virtual realities, like Second Life, traditional systems of behavior and codes of morality are determined by the same individuals who function within that system, unlike the physical world. From my research into the behaviors of Second Life users, the obligatory 'god-complex' that would likely develop in such a situation is rare. Most Second Life users construct their avatar to resemble their given physical appearance and do not take great liberties in altering their creation. In one case, also

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[8] Bergo, Bettina. "Emmanuel Levinas." *(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)*. Stanford University, 2011. Web. 17 Apr. 2012. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/levinas/.

[9] Direct Source: An interview with Bernard Drax, Second Life user and advocate "Draxtor… and Media for All!" *Draxtor… and Media for All!* Web. 18 Mar. 2012. http://www.draxtor.com/.

[10] *Life 2.0*. Dir. Jason Spingarn-Koff. Documentary. Andrew Lauren Productions (ALP), 2010. DVD.

explained by Drax, a remarkably attractive Second Life user constructed his avatar to appear grizzly, unkempt, and ugly, much unlike his real physical appearance. This decision was based on that user's desire to experience interactions with others beyond the facade of beauty as a determining factor.[11]

Other benefits afforded to Second Life users include the ability to interact with individuals across geographic boundaries, conduct legitimate business operations quickly and easily, and satisfy social relationship needs without having to leave your home. Virtual realities constitute a new way of navigating, building genuine relationships, and virtually experiencing much of the world. Drax also describes his paternal grandfather who refused to own a telephone, the man claimed that he wanted to "talk to real people, not a piece of plastic." In the simplest terms, Second Life and worlds like it constitute a similar shift in social and cultural norms of communication. However, unlike the telephone, graphic content may be produced with no basis in real life, as the advertisers of Second Life proclaim, anything you can imagine is possible.

In accordance with Lacan's theory of *jouisance*, or the insatiability of our desires, we can understand this limitless frontier as an attempt to fulfill unconscious needs. Unable to obtain the perfect job, find the perfect partner, or embody the ideal form in physical reality users of virtual reality are offered greater possibilities to these ends. This indicates motivation, but what of the consequences? If Levinas is correct and the essence of existence lies in our actions toward and between one another, does the nature of that existence change when those interactions are based on simulation? We've already seen how the virtual interactions of some users manifest as legitimate emotions, in the case of our *Life 2.0* subjects this was in the form of love. That same couple ultimately decides to meet in the physical world despite existing relationships. This decision and resulting actions constitute a transgression of the effects of a simulation into the

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[11] See Drax.

real. Is there harm in this? The betrayal of a partner within the realm of simulation is not favorable but that betrayal manifest physically has a much greater impact, as we see in the documentary, the marriage of one Second Life user is greatly damaged because of her actions in and then out of the virtual world.

In this same case, the connection between these individuals is self-described as "more real than any relationship in the real world."[12] However, we must remember that every interaction between the two is mediated by the appearance of their avatars. Stanford University researchers Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson term real life behavior changes in response to the actions of others as mediated by an avatar as the Proteus Effect.[13] Rooted in Self-Perception Theory and Deindividuation Theory in which test subjects respond different to a person dressed in various types of uniforms or costumes that carry positive or negative connotations. "In online environments, the avatar is not simply a uniform that is worn, the avatar is our entire self-representation. And in the same way that [test] subjects in black uniforms conform to a more aggressive identity, users in online environments may conform to the expectations and stereotypes of the identity of their avatars. Or more precisely, in line with self- perception theory, they conform to the behavior that they believe others would expect them to have."[14] The observations of these researchers provide additional arguments that simulations directly affect attitudes and behaviors of the physical world. In the minds of these Second Life users, the virtual world has become real. Ultimately, the line between virtual and physical becomes less distinct as belief in the veracity and value of simulation grows. In the future, it may not be necessary to distinguish between the real of virtual versus physical realities.

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[12] See *Life 2.0.*

[13] Yee, N., Harris, H., Jabon, M., Bailenson, J.N. (2011). The Expression of Personality in Virtual Worlds. *Social Psychology and Personality Science*.

[14] See Yee, pp. 12.

VII. Conclusion

      If we follow Plato's line of thinking, these simulations and their ability to cross into reality corrupt what is true and valuable in reality. However, if truth is based on belief, as Second Life users would argue then there is no singular truth to corrupt. It seems Aristotle's rationale for art and simulation is more applicable, though in many cases the 'safe realm' of simulation in which to work out our daily anxieties transgresses into the real. This is the most important effect of virtual realities. For those who participate in Second Life it is easy to distinguish between avatar-mediated interactions and physical interactions. We often overlook the fact that much of our daily communication and information gathering is mediated by technology; email, social networks, and web-based experiences of all kinds require digital simulation. These simulations are absorbed through repeated and continuous use until they are taken to be real; an email today is as valid and valued as a phone call a fifty years ago and a face-to-face interaction a century before that. Baudrillard's theory of hyper-reality, in this case, can explain the evolution of dependence on and acceptance of technology mediated forms of communication. Ultimately, virtual reality is simply the next frontier and, as many Second Life users exemplify, existing behavioral frameworks, standards, and expectations apply. The question remaining is "what's next"?

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